

of scraps of tarpaulin and cardboard, he told me how he had rescued his wife, Latifah, and their six children as the war reached their village. They had left their possessions and fled.

'All this war, the bombs, explosions and everything it's done make me hopelessly bitter about life, thinking we won't survive.'

Latifah joined in: 'Warplanes and air strikes terrify our children . . . It is very cold. The situation is tough. There is nothing to keep us warm, no mattresses. Our tents are just made of cardboard. We have nothing.'

The pressure of the war pervaded every part of life in Marib. The doctors at the hunger clinic said that ten out of every hundred children were malnourished. Of that ten, two had severe malnutrition. In one of the beds was Taqua Tarish, who was six months old and weighed 2.5 kilos, less than many newborns.

In the camp, I asked Abdullah who was responsible for their misery. He didn't have food, or much water for his family. 'I cannot blame anyone. This was destined for us and all Yemenis. This has to do with the big guys, not the ordinary people.'

When the Covid-19 pandemic was raging, rich states cut the funds that were needed to keep Yemen going. The UN humanitarian chief Mark Lowcock warned that it made Yemen's future even worse. 'It feels like the end, it feels like a calamity,' he told me over Zoom, a bizarre blend of modern communications and timeless despair. 'They feel as if the world has forgotten them. It's chaotic and anarchic and desperate . . . Unless action is taken straight away, we're going to see a tragedy of globally catastrophic proportions.'

Deal of the Century

In a world where most people get their news online and on TV, 14 May 2018 was declared to be the ultimate split-screen moment. Screens across the planet showed two intimately connected events in adjoining boxes. One was the opening ceremony for the new embassy of the United States of America in Jerusalem. The other screen showed Israeli troops shooting at Palestinian demonstrators across the wire that separates Israel from the Gaza Strip, and many dead and wounded being rushed towards ambulances by their friends.

Guests at the embassy, mostly Americans, had been shuttled to the ceremony by bus. It felt like the complacency express, with an atmosphere on board of self-congratulation and long-overdue victory. The people in the seats around me had mostly come from the American Midwest. They did not know much about the Middle East, except for a strong belief that Israel knew best and the Palestinians were making a big mistake if they didn't agree with Donald Trump and Benjamin Netanyahu. As the guests arrived, they were presented with souvenir baseball caps to mark the moment. Some swapped them with the red caps branded with Trump's 'Make America Great Again' slogan that they had worn for the journey.

On the opposite side of the screen, around sixty miles away in real life, thousands of Palestinians were taking part in a protest Hamas called 'the Great March of Return'. The crowds were big. Some

Palestinians, mostly young men, were getting close to the wire; a few tried to breach it. Israeli soldiers were shooting at them. About a kilometre back, out of range of gunfire, were thousands of peaceful demonstrators. Women had brought picnics. Families, including many children, screamed and scattered when Israeli drones buzzed overhead bombing the crowds with tear gas.

Between fifty and sixty Palestinians were killed that day, and many more suffered gruesome bullet wounds. In the months that followed the embassy's inauguration, the Friday demonstrations continued. Palestinians flew incendiary balloons across the border that would crash-land and become firebombs, burning crops in the fields. The Israeli army used live bullets to control crowds close to the wire. Gaza's surgeons are experts in dealing with the impact of high-velocity bullets on human bodies, but dozens of catastrophically damaged limbs were amputated, many from teenage boys who had been shot as they demonstrated or threw stones. Every Friday the sun laced through dust, gas and gunfire, and there was the sight and sound of casualties being rushed to hospital. At the end of March 2019, the UN humanitarian agency OCHA said that the pressure of almost 29,000 wounded, 7,000 of them hit by live bullets, had driven the healthcare system in Gaza close to collapse. By then, Israeli security forces had killed 195 Palestinians at the border demonstrations, including forty-one children.¹

On a screen within a screen, President Donald Trump was piped in to the embassy from Washington to claim that he was putting right an old wrong. 'For many years we failed to acknowledge the obvious,' he said. 'The plain reality that Israel's capital is Jerusalem.'² To make up for his absence, Trump sent over his administration's most photogenic power couple: his daughter Ivanka, who had converted to Judaism when she married, and her husband Jared Kushner, who was slim, wealthy, and the president's senior advisor.

Hamas, the Palestinian faction that took control of Gaza by force in 2007, organized the demonstrations to channel the anger brewed by years of isolation and pressure away from itself and towards Israel. Gaza had been squeezed for more than ten years by a blockade imposed by Israel and supported by its allies, who agreed that Hamas was a terrorist organization. The tough life imposed on Gaza was so

familiar that it took a lot to get it on the news. To try to change the game, Hamas linked its strategy to the fundamental pillars of the conflict. For Palestinians none were more important than Jerusalem's future and the loss of homes and land in 1948, when more than three-quarters of a million of them were expelled or fled Israel's war of independence, never to be allowed back.

When the casualty figures came in, Donald Trump's officials blamed Hamas for inciting Palestinians to break into Israel and use murderous violence to attack soldiers. At the embassy, Ivanka Trump's blonde hair shone in the sun as she unveiled a commemorative plaque on the new embassy. She was rebadging the former consulate as an embassy until a new one could be built, so that her father could keep a campaign promise to move the US ambassador from Tel Aviv. Until then, America, like almost all foreign countries, had kept its embassy out of Jerusalem because Israelis and Palestinians were bitterly divided about its future, and legally its precise status was undefined. Both sides wanted it as their capital; most countries said embassies should wait until a peace deal answered the question. But Donald Trump had strong political reasons to offer Prime Minister Netanyahu's government everything it wanted.

Trump dropped any pretence of even-handedness to keep his electoral base happy. The core of support for Israel in the US Republican Party comes from evangelical Christians; traditionally, most of the Jewish vote goes to the Democrats. Coach parties of pilgrims from American evangelical churches are fixtures at Israel's biblical sites. Megiddo, the biblical Armageddon, is one of their favourites. Amiable, deeply religious Christians, often in safari or hiking outfits, stroll around excavated ruins, stopping for prayer sessions and blood-curdling Bible readings describing the prophecy that the kings of the earth would gather at Armageddon to battle God, who would destroy them. Politely, they excused themselves from my questions to bow their heads to pray as they listened to Matthew's account of how 'the Lord cometh, cruel both with wrath and fierce anger, to lay the land desolate: and he shall destroy the sinners'. A round of passionate amens went round each group before they dusted off their trousers and headed for the next stop.

Donald Trump believed in winners and losers, friends and enemies.

His friend Benjamin Netanyahu was a winner, so he could have all he wanted. Sometimes it was even more than he had asked for, like encouragement from the White House to annex occupied territory in the West Bank, a move the Israeli security establishment advised would be a needless provocation. If Israel was the winner in Trump-world, Palestinians were the losers. He stopped American taxpayers' money going to help Palestinians, even for medical care, and closed the Palestinian mission in Washington, DC. Diplomats with families were not allowed to stay long enough to get their children through the school year.

Trump believed he was the best dealmaker ever to inhabit the White House, and what bigger deal was there to be done than bringing peace to the Middle East? Jared Kushner was put to work on Trump's 'deal of the century'. Just over a year after the bloody day when the US embassy in Jerusalem was opened, I met Kushner with some other journalists at Winfield House, the palatial London residence of the US ambassador. 'Call me Jared,' the polite and friendly Kushner told a deferential reporter. Trump, he said, believed that the conflict needed a solution, even though it was only the fourth most serious problem in the Middle East, after 'Iran, ISIS and radicalization'.

Kushner said that he had told his father-in-law that short-term problems after they opened the embassy were inevitable, but 'people in the Middle East respect strength'. The last twelve months had proved it: 'When we moved, people said the world would end. But the sun came up the next day and it didn't happen. We did Jerusalem and the Golan for Israel. [Trump also recognized Israel's annexation of occupied Syrian land.] We did it so no one could say that we would compromise Israel's security.'³

Jared was going to forget traditional diplomacy in the Middle East. It had failed, so he would use the skills that had made his family real-estate moguls in New York. His lawyer had an 'issues list': talk of history or process was out, because 'these guys are professionals in not making a deal'. So was old language like 'two-state solution', because it meant different things to different people. Instead, Kushner had drawn up a business plan for the Palestinians that he said came with 'world-class' grants, loans and private capital. Kushner presented

it in Bahrain a few weeks later; the politics would come second. He talked very fast, like an exceptionally articulate salesman. The problem was the product he was selling, which was a crude attempt to buy off the Palestinians with unreliable promises of 50 billion dollars of investment. The Trump message was that their dreams of independence were dead, but they would lose twice over if they turned down such a great deal. Trump loyalists, the Israeli government and its friends applauded loudly. Most other observers saw a one-sided plan designed for the requirements of the Israeli government and responded with everything from scepticism to derision and outright rejection.⁴

They unveiled the Deal of the Century in the packed East Room of the White House six months later, in January 2020. I joined the crush in the media pen, uncomfortably aware of news reports about a deadly virus that was on its way from China. It may have been the deal of the century for Trump and Netanyahu, but it was no kind of peace plan for the Palestinians, who had not been consulted and were not in the room. The East Room was sweaty and euphoric, more like a wedding reception than a state occasion. Israeli and American VIPs and staffers whooped and hollered. The biggest cheers were for President Trump's reminders of what he had done for Israel. Prime Minister Netanyahu said it was one of the most important moments of his life – as important for Israel as independence in 1948.

They were celebrating a surrender document that said, in effect, that Israel had won and would decide the future along with its American friends. If Palestinians refused to sign up, even though they had no part in its drafting, Israel would still get what it wanted and they would be even worse off. The Palestinians were extremely weak, but they refused to sign. Kushner's work broke records for the fastest time from delivery to a place in the dustbin of history.

The party in the East Room was the high point of a fantasy that Trump and Netanyahu had created for themselves. Together, preening with power, they would deliver the fatal blow to Palestinian nationalism and declare victory after a century of conflict. It was a fantasy with deep roots. Unlike Trump, Netanyahu was an expert in Zionist thought. He knew the most famous line from *Altneuland* (*Old New Land*), Theodor Herzl's utopian novel about a Jewish state: 'If you will

it, it is no dream.' Netanyahu's father, Benzion, was an early disciple of Ze'ev Jabotinsky, the founder of right-wing Jewish nationalism. Jabotinsky's 1923 essay "The Iron Wall" contains a political prophecy that is still an article of faith on the Israeli right: 'It is utterly impossible to obtain the voluntary consent of the Palestine Arabs for converting "Palestine" from an Arab country into a country with a Jewish majority.' Zionists, Jabotinsky wrote, would have to protect themselves by force of arms; they would build an iron wall around their state. The Arabs would dash themselves against it time and again, until they realized that Zionism was unbeatable.

As long as the Arabs feel that there is the least hope of getting rid of us, they will refuse to give up this hope in return for either kind words or for bread and butter, because they are not a rabble, but a living people. And when a living people yields in matters of such a vital character it is only when there is no longer any hope of getting rid of us, because they can make no breach in the iron wall.⁵

Only then would Palestinians reject radical leaders and agree to coexist with the Jews. The two sides could then negotiate the future. Jabotinsky was a dissident; he challenged mainstream Zionist thinking, but his views defined Israel's position towards the Palestinians long after his death in 1940. As the Oxford historian Avi Shlaim argues, successive Israeli prime ministers absorbed the first part of Jabotinsky's theory of the iron wall, about unassailable military power. But only Yitzhak Rabin at the time of the Oslo agreements in the 1990s tried to activate the second part, by negotiating a coexistence deal.

Netanyahu and Trump deluded themselves that Israel and American power had made the iron wall so strong that it was safe to bypass the negotiations Jabotinsky believed were vital. They decided that the Palestinians were so badly beaten that they would accept surrender, leaving America and Israel free to deal with Iran, the real threat. If Kushner had read Jabotinsky, he had ignored the stricture that Palestinians could never be 'bribed to abandon to us their claim to priority in Palestine, in return for cultural and economic advantages'.

I left the celebrations at the White House and went back to the BBC office in Washington, DC. The whooping at the party in the East Room felt divorced from the reality I had seen in Israel and the Palestinian territories; the danger of ignoring Palestinian anger and denying they had rights to the land was obvious. In the lift at the office, a video screen played new headlines about the virus in Wuhan. The pandemic in the spring of 2020 meant that much of the world was distracted while the old conflict between Israelis and Palestinians was reigniting, and was surprised when in the early spring of 2021 it exploded again.

It happened after a tangible step by the Trump administration to impose its vision of a new Middle East. Just before the presidential election in 2020, Jared Kushner delivered agreements that normalized relations between Israel and four Arab countries: the United Arab Emirates, Bahrain, Morocco and Sudan. From the balcony of the White House, Trump proclaimed that they would 'change the course of history . . . we mark the dawn of a new Middle East'. A comprehensive peace was on the way. The deals were named the Abraham Accords, acknowledging that the signatories traced their religious roots to the same Old Testament prophet.

These were not peace deals, because none of the countries was at war with Israel. The accords cut across a peace initiative the Saudis had put on the table in 2002, offering Israel full recognition in return for leaving the territory captured in 1967, agreeing to Palestinian independence with a capital in East Jerusalem along with a just solution for Palestinian refugees. It was a framework that fitted most international interpretations of the two-state solution, but it required concessions that Israel would not make.⁶ The Abraham Accords offered Israel normal diplomatic relations without concessions.

The Arab side was given sweeteners for signing up. The Emirates were allowed to buy the F-35, the latest American warplane, though when Trump left office that part of the arrangement fell apart. The US recognized Morocco's claim to sovereignty over the disputed Western Sahara. Sudan was removed from America's list of terrorist nations. The side deals helped, but the main reason why the rulers of the UAE and Bahrain signed was that they were more worried about Iran and building their economies than resolving Palestinian

grievances, and they believed slavish loyalty to the Palestinian cause was holding them back. Netanyahu called the accords a 'pivot of history'. It was conventional wisdom in Israel that the Palestinians were just another issue to manage. Palestinians knew they could not win and it was time for everyone to move on. Jabotinsky's iron wall had done its job. The problem was that, while Gulf Arabs were tired of the conflict and happy to certify a relationship with Israel that had been quietly strengthening for decades, they were a long way from Palestinians, who were as far from surrender as ever.

The folly and hubris of ignoring the power of religious and national passion was exposed during the spring of 2021. A long-running court case to evict Palestinians from their homes in Sheikh Jarrah, a leafy, well-to-do neighbourhood in occupied and annexed East Jerusalem, escalated into weeks of violence. Israeli police fired stun grenades and CS gas into al-Aqsa Mosque on Laylat al-Qadr, the holiest night of Ramadan. It was more than just a dispute over a handful of homes. Both sides saw it as the latest instalment in the long campaign by successive Israeli governments to make Jerusalem more Jewish.

It is easy to see why Israelis believed so strongly that they were winning. Since 1967, when the Palestinian territories were captured, they had built a ring of settlements for Jews on occupied land around Jerusalem in defiance of international law. When it was almost complete, the priority switched to moving Jews into areas that were solidly Palestinian in and around the walled Old City. Between 1967 and 2021 they had settled more than 620,000 Jews on occupied land, including more than 210,000 in occupied Jerusalem. I had watched as the first Palestinian house was turned over to Jewish control in Sheikh Jarrah back in the 1990s. It made international news for a few days, before fading back into a landscape where the settlers lived in a world of security cameras and armed guards.

But in Jerusalem, quiet does not mean acceptance. Anger and frustration built up among Palestinians as they saw land being taken. The Palestinian writer Raja Shehadeh tramped around the West Bank seeing the familiar sights of his life disappearing. 'The worst thing', he wrote, 'is the sense of being a stranger in your own land and feeling

that not a single part of it is yours.'⁷ Small moments like the first house being taken by settlers in Sheikh Jarrah faded from the international consciousness quite quickly. But each extension of Israeli control fed Palestinian nationalism.

It always takes a spark to set off deep-seated anger. In the spring of 2021 it came with Israel's dangerous attempt to make political points about who was boss during Ramadan in Jerusalem. For believers, one of the pleasures of the holy month is sitting out on a warm evening with friends and family after the meal that breaks the daily fast, and the steps outside Damascus Gate, the entrance into the Old City most used by Palestinians, were a favourite place to hang out. When a new police chief decided to rope off the area and issue orders to move on anyone who tried to sit there, it turned into a predictable and unnecessary nightly riot. Water cannons fired stinking 'skunk water'; young Palestinians took on the police; activists confronted Israeli nationalist politicians who jumped on the bandwagon with their thuggish followers.

Palestinians were used to getting little or no leadership from the president of the Palestinian Authority, Mahmoud Abbas. He was elderly and presided over an administration that many Palestinians saw as inept, corrupt and compromised by cooperating with Israel over security. Just before Ramadan, Abbas cancelled elections, which would have been the first for Palestinians since 2006. He said it was because Israel would not let Palestinians in Jerusalem vote. His critics said it was because it looked as if he was going to lose. Netanyahu's hubris and the passivity of Abbas gave Hamas an opportunity to take the lead in Jerusalem. Hamas issued an ultimatum to Israel to remove its forces from the al-Aqsa compound and from Sheikh Jarrah. Like most people, I assumed this was empty talk – until they fired rockets at Jerusalem when their ultimatum was ignored. Almost immediately, Israel hit back with air strikes in Gaza.

At the end of eleven dangerous days, both sides accepted a ceasefire while also claiming victory. Israeli leaders listed the buildings they had destroyed, the Hamas commanders and fighters they had killed, and the way that their Iron Dome anti-missile system knocked out most of the salvos coming from Gaza. Most, but not all; there was evidence, worrying for Israel, that Iron Dome struggled to deal with

big bombardments. This would matter much more against Lebanon and Hizbullah, which has a bigger, more powerful arsenal than Hamas.

A new war between Hizbullah and Israel would be a nightmare for both sides. Wars with Hamas are less alarming for Israelis. The Palestinians in Gaza have a fraction of the missiles available to Hizbullah, and everyone knows that once honour is satisfied on both sides, mediators will deliver a ceasefire. Much more alarming in Israel was the unexpected way that the conflict spread to cities with a mixed population of Arabs and Jews. Around 80 per cent of Israelis are Jews, and almost all the rest are descendants of Palestinians whose families did not leave during the Nakba of 1948. In 2021, they came out on the streets to support their cousins in Gaza and the West Bank. The result was days of ugly violence between Palestinian and Jewish youths, all of whom carried Israeli identity cards. There had been occasional violence ever since the Israeli government lifted military rule over its Palestinian population in 1966, but this was different. It showed a solidarity between the Palestinians of Gaza, Israel and the West Bank, including Jerusalem, that heartened them and alarmed Israel's Jews.

It was another reason why the leader of Hamas in Gaza, Yahya Sinwar, emerged triumphantly from hiding the day after the ceasefire. Huge banners of Hamas leaders were draped from the Dome of the Rock in Jerusalem, sixty miles from Gaza, and their slogans were chanted outside the al-Aqsa Mosque after prayers. The simple message from Hamas – that it would fight to the death for Jerusalem – resonated with Palestinians who despaired at the inability of President Mahmoud Abbas to slow down, let alone stop, the steady progress of Israel's colonization of the land they wanted for a state.

Once the ceasefire came into force, Israel unlocked the gates of the Gaza Strip and let in journalists. Entire streets in Gaza City were blocked with concrete and masonry from buildings that had been destroyed by air strikes. I drove south along the beach to Khan Younis, a town dominated by a big refugee camp. The town had stopped for the funeral of nine fighters from Islamic Jihad, whose bodies had been dug out of the tunnels where they were killed by Israeli air strikes. The dead were brought in on stretchers, wrapped in Palestinian flags. In the heat I could smell the rot wafting across the football stadium,

where several thousand men had gathered for a mass funeral. Fighters from Islamic Jihad lined up with their weapons, their faces covered in black balaclavas or wrapped in black and white checked keffiyehs. When the scarves slipped, I could see that they were little more than boys still trying hard to grow beards.

Masked and armed young men are a common sight in Gaza. What surprised me was the support they had in the town, considering they had brought Israel's wrath down on the heads of the people. The streets were packed, with men and boys marching behind the bodies to the cemetery, and women and girls crowding onto doorsteps and balconies to ululate and clap as they went by. Part of it was relief. The ceasefire meant that the latest round in the long war was over.

In the twenty-first century, everyone with a smartphone can be a war cameraman. I wanted to find the location of a video that had appeared online in May 2021 during the latest Hamas–Israel war. In it, a man filming with his phone runs towards a place that had just been hit, getting more and more agitated as he realizes what he's about to see. I could hear it in his breathing. Women, heard but not seen, are screaming louder and louder as he gets closer. The man's voice is thick with shock as he calls out to God. After that, he can only manage single words. Children. Martyr. Massacre, a new massacre.

All the pain and pity of war are in those few seconds. The man recognizes one of the bodies – *They're Youssef's kids*, he mutters. He goes from body to body. It's hard to tell how many are dead from the video; at first I think six, but in fact there are eight. Someone finds a teenage boy alive. He's unconscious and they bundle him into a car to take him to the hospital. The dead bodies are shredded. Delicate human tissue has no chance against high explosive and shrapnel. They have been working – a cart, with an empty harness for a horse or a donkey, is half loaded with white sacks and others are stacked up, waiting to be taken away. A man in his thirties, a father holding the body of a small boy, throws back his head and roars with grief to God as he lays the body down next to another dead boy.

I went looking for the sandy lane that the man had run along in the video and found it just north of Beit Hanoun, a town close to Israel's

border fortifications. The road led to a village that was too small for a proper name. Local people called it 'the end of Masrideen Street'. It is around 800 metres from the boundary wire with Israel. And in the early evening of 10 May, the first day of the war, it turned into a small corner of hell.

Near the place I recognized from the video, where bodies had lain broken in the sand, I saw men sitting to mourn their dead. Small boys ran around, offering cups of bitter coffee and sweet dates to visitors who had arrived to offer their condolences. At the centre of it was the man I recognized from the video. His name was Youssef al-Masri.

The dead boys I had seen Youssef laying down next to each other on the blood-soaked sand were his sons, seven-year-old Marwan and eleven-year-old Ibrahim. Three of the other dead came from the family of Youssef's brother, Mohammed Attallah, who was still badly wounded in hospital. They were his son Ahmad, who was twenty-one, his daughter Rahaf, eight, and his fourteen-month-old grandson, Yazan. Two other children from neighbouring families were killed, sixteen-year-old Ibrahim Abdullah Hassanein and ten-year-old Hussein Munir Hamad. Another neighbour, twenty-three-year-old Mohammed Ali Nusseir, was also killed. He had a small business with Ibrahim Hassanein, selling the animal feed that the older children were bagging up.

The Masri family were not Hamas supporters. When families in Gaza gather to mourn their dead, they tend to display their political or military affiliations. The Masri family flew the flags and insignia of Fatah, who took no part in the war, on the memorial tent, next to photographs of the victims. Youssef al-Masri told me with some pride that he was a member of the Palestinian police force, loyal to the president Mahmoud Abbas in Ramallah. An official from Fatah was there with his entourage to offer sympathy. And sitting quietly next to Youssef was his surviving son, nine-year-old Mohammed.

The boys who had been running around with coffee and dates were sent to get the debris left by the Israeli projectile. They laid it out while Youssef talked about the memory that replayed endlessly in his head of picking up his sons' bodies: 'Until now, I can't get those images out of my head, when you see your kids torn apart and shredded in front of your eyes. I can't describe it any more. This is the most

heinous and criminal thing I have ever seen committed against our children. Every year or two, they wage war on us and our children and our homes. Our life in Gaza is indescribable. There's no life, drinking water, food, electricity or hospitals like other humans have.'

Israel insisted that Youssef was blaming the wrong side. Lieutenant-Colonel Jonathan Conricus, the army spokesman, told me when I was back in Jerusalem that he could not be 100 per cent forensically certain, as it was a chaotic time, but their best assessment was that the deaths had been caused by an Islamic Jihad missile falling short of its target in Israel. Israeli forces, he said, were not active in the area at the time of the strike.

Like every Palestinian I have ever met, Youssef al-Masri believes that Israel tells lies to cover up the brutal requirements of its project to strengthen its state. I asked him about his wife, who in a traditional society I was not able to visit. She was coping, he said; sitting with the women in their home, away from the eyes of strangers. Sometimes in Britain, we tell ourselves that it is better not to intrude into other people's grief. In Gaza and across the Middle East, it is the other way round, and the bereaved have constant, unannounced visits. Men sit in lines of chairs outside the family home, surrounded by photos of the dead. The women do the same, in private. No one is left alone to grieve.

Youssef al-Masri spoke with great intensity, staring at me from under his black baseball cap. 'I will face my future with boldness and with full force. I will get babies. Instead of Marwan and Ibrahim, I will get another Marwan, Ibrahim and Khalil, Mohammed and Mahmoud.' His dead boys, he said, were martyrs for Jerusalem. If necessary, the children yet to be born could be, too.

I looked at nine-year-old Mohammed, the survivor, sitting next to his father, listening, saying nothing and absorbing every word. I wondered about the colossal impact that seeing his brothers die so violently would have on his life. I remembered how, during the second Palestinian intifada in the first years of the century, I used to sit with the late Palestinian psychiatrist Dr Eyad el-Sarraj in his garden, discussing the pain that the conflict was implanting in children.

The children we talked about are now adults. They are the generation that lined up with guns and masks at the funeral of Islamic

Jihad fighters in Khan Younis on the day that I got back into Gaza into 2021. Twenty years earlier, Sarraj told me, 'Twenty-four per cent of our children up to the age of twelve think that the best thing in life when you are eighteen is to die as a martyr. There is a second life out of the misery of this life of deprivation, of hardship, of humiliation . . . People want to cling to that hope, and some are ready to take the test by challenging death through killing and killing themselves.'

Youssef al-Masri did not look like the kind of man who would bring up his children to waste their lives. I feared for the future of his son Mohammed if the crushing weight on the shoulders of everyone in Gaza could not somehow be lifted. Most people in Gaza struggle to provide a decent life for their children. In 1998, Ehud Barak, one of Israel's most illustrious soldiers, had a candid moment during his successful campaign to become prime minister. He told an Israeli journalist, 'If I were a Palestinian of the right age, I would join, at some point, one of the terrorist groups and fight from there, and later try to influence from within the political system.' He added the caveat that 'From our standpoint, their methods are very abominable, villainous, inhumane and inappropriate.' The point was that young men who are brought up to fight see no alternative. When the British were in Palestine in the 1940s, they condemned the Jewish nationalists who had picked up guns against them as terrorists. Two of them, Menachem Begin and Yitzhak Shamir, became prime ministers of Israel. Begin made peace with Egypt. In his memoir, *The Revolt*, he wrote that the British establishment regarded him as 'Terrorist Number One'. He said he hated British rule, but not the British people. Palestinian nationalists often say the same thing about Israelis.

A few dozen steps away from the Masris, another family was mourning a son. Ibrahim Hassanein was the sixteen-year-old who had been killed while loading the feed sacks. His family had none of Youssef's defiance and simply looked broken. Like all the other families in the village, they had left their homes after the raid. When they came home they found their house destroyed by Israeli shelling. Ibrahim's older brother Mohammed showed me the damage. He was a medical student, and his brother's death had unmoored him, leaving him stuck in the horror of the first day of the war and full of questions to which he knew the answers.

'What did they do wrong?' he asked. 'Were they launching missiles? Were they firing anything at all? Innocent children. They just want to play and to eat. That's all they do. I can't study. My brother's martyrdom was sudden and shocking. It's just so strange and it has shattered my dreams.'

Outside the ruined house his mother, Amena, was sitting in the garden, surrounded by women from her family. They would not leave her alone with her grief and the memories of the last time she saw her son alive.

'Ibrahim, may God have mercy on his soul, he was happy, he took a shower and put on aftershave, and he was laughing and walking around the house. It was a very special laugh.

'I'd call to him, where are you, and he'd say, I'm here Mum! He was going round and round the house like a bird. He was very happy that day. He left then, and he never came back.

'I ask God to bring justice [to the Israelis]. I pray for that, night and day. The children were innocent. They did nothing wrong.'

They sat in the garden next to the ruins of their home, serenaded by songbirds in cages that somehow they had saved. Ibrahim's father, Abdullah, was a poor man who borrowed money to buy his son the cart that was still standing, half loaded, next to where the children had been killed. Talking about his son seemed to give him a moment of peace. 'You start to imagine him alive in front of you. You look at his picture to calm yourself down. You want your son to breathe, you want to carry him and sleep next to him.'

Ibrahim was the family dynamo, who had given up school to support his family and pay the university fees for his quieter, studious brother. The cart his father took on debt to buy was going to be the start of a better life, and they were lost without his dreams and plans.

Abdullah spoke directly to the Israelis: 'He's a boy like your boys. I have a son and you have a son, so why kill him? We are trying to make a living, not to fight wars. We don't have artillery to hit you. The distance between us is just eight hundred metres. We used to sleep well, because there's no fear here. But when you decide to break our hearts and set them on fire by killing him, we get to hate life and only hatred will exist between us.'

Like Youssef al-Masri, Abdullah Hassanein did not believe Israel

when it insisted it tried hard not to kill civilians. Sometimes, Israel does warn civilians to leave buildings that are about to be bombed. Human Rights Watch reported after the ceasefire that both Israel and Hamas, and other armed groups in Gaza, violated the laws of war during the eleven-day conflict. Its report said that Israel had not provided any information to justify the attack on the people at the end of Masrideen Street.

Gaza is a unique and terrible experiment. Palestinians who live there often say it is the world's biggest open-air prison. The rich world felt hemmed in when it missed foreign holidays during the Covid-19 pandemic; in Gaza, more than two million Palestinians spend their lives stuck on a narrow stretch of coast around twenty-five miles long and no more than seven miles wide. One of my Palestinian colleagues there in May 2021 was forty-one years old, the father of three children, and had never left.

Palestinians in Gaza survive, and even enjoy life, because the human spirit is remarkably bright and strong there. Most people I've met in Gaza are warm and open, even to the citizens of Western allies of Israel whose countries have given them a lot about which to complain. On the first evening after the ceasefire came into force, the streets of Rimal, the best-off part of Gaza City, were crowded. Less than twenty-four hours earlier, they had been empty as civilians stayed inside, hoping their homes were strong enough to protect them against another air strike. At the most popular falafel restaurant, the arms of the man who shapes and cooks the little chickpea balls in hot oil were a blur as he tried to keep up with demand. Children bounced on trampolines in play areas of open-air cafes as their parents sat drinking tea and smoking shisha. Even the sound of Israeli drones, endlessly circling and watching, did not spoil their good mood. Like the previous rounds of fighting between Israel and Hamas, the ceasefire was just a pause. The conflict was not just unresolved; it was not even frozen.

Without question, Israelis also suffer when wars start in and around Gaza. During the eleven-day war in May 2021, a five-year-old boy called Ido Avigdal was killed in Sderot, a small border town, when a Hamas rocket hit his home. I was in Ashqelon, just north of the Gaza Strip, as it suffered repeated red alerts while missiles

that had not been stopped by the Iron Dome system came in from Gaza. When the sirens sound and a phone app blinks a message to take cover, it is frightening. The app tells you how long you've got. In Ashqelon, you have around ten seconds; in Sderot, it is less than that. We were in a restaurant run by Russian Israelis which had a refuge with a reinforced concrete roof and walls. Some of the kitchen staff took cover in a walk-in fridge.

But the two experiences, in Gaza and Israel, were not the same. In 2021, Israel showed once again that for all its power, it could not beat enemies who count survival as victory. It also showed how deluded it is to think that a mutually acceptable peace is not necessary because the Palestinians are beaten. Far from being over, the conflict festers and looks to be intensifying. Without remedial action, the next war is always inevitable.